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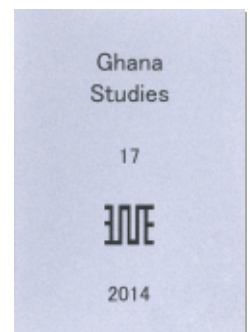
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THE KUSASI-MAMPRUSI CONFLICT IN BAWKU: A LEGACY OF BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY IN NORTHERN GHANA

Felix Y. T. Longi

Introduction

Post-colonial Africa has witnessed a phenomenal increase in conflicts of various magnitudes, mostly arising out of disagreements over a variety of issues including ownership of land, succession to chieftaincy titles, and resource allocation, among others. The West African sub-region has had its fair share of these upheavals, notably in Liberia, Sierra-Leone and Cote d'Ivoire. Ghana is among the few countries in West Africa perceived to be oasis of peace in a sub-region otherwise characterized by civil wars, rebel activities and general instability. This image of Ghana, however, only masks a festering wound of communal violence, inter-ethnic conflicts and armed confrontations in the Northern part of Ghana. The root causes of these conflicts, which have almost become persistent, are largely traceable to the introduction of secular political authority/chieftaincy in areas which, before colonialism, were described as stateless or acephalous. The security of the entire country has often been compromised by the scope of unrest, wanton loss of lives and property, waste of the nation's scarce resources and the dislocation of people.

Generally, scholars are divided in their discussion of the root causes of inter-ethnic conflicts that occur in Northern Ghana as a result of disputes over succession to a chieftaincy title or office. One school of thought traced the genesis of these conflicts to

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attempts by anthropologists and the colonial administration to categorize societies in that part of the country into acephalous/non-centralized and centralized groups, while the other school of thought identified other factors beyond the colonial enterprise.¹ This paper examines the genesis of the Mamprusi-Kusasi conflict in Bawku within the context of the first school of thought. It begins with a discussion of the settlement histories of the two groups and their pre-colonial traditional political structures, the colonial intrusion and the changes made to the existing political structures and implications to Mamprusi-Kusasi relations.

Location and Traditions of Settlement

Bawku is located in the north-easternmost corner of Ghana. It is a major town and market centre close to two international borders, Togo to the east and Burkina Faso to the north. Benin and Niger are also not too distant from Bawku. By its geographical location and its commercial activities, Bawku has become a polyglot society of immigrants from other parts of Ghana and neighboring countries. Economic opportunities, largely commercial activities, have been the catalyst for the presence of immigrants in Bawku. Its diverse population engaged in myriad commercial enterprises has made Bawku increasingly cosmopolitan. The Kusasi (who claim to be the autochthones) and the Mamprusi (seen by Kusasi as warrior new-comers), however, have remained the dominant ethnic groups. The 2000 Population and Housing Census report showed a Kusasi majority followed by the Mamprusi.² The Kusasi constitute 75% and 45% of the total population in Bawku West and Bawku East respectively.

At the heart of the Kusasi-Mamprusi conflict is an agglomeration of issues about litigations over allodial rights and chieftaincy.

¹ Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (eds.), *African Political Systems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 5; R. S. Rattray *Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*, vol.1 and 2 (London: Oxford at Clarendon Press, 1932).

² 2000 *Population and Housing Census of Ghana* (Ghana Statistical Service).

Both the Kusasi and the Mamprusi claim allodial ownership of Bawku, claims which are shrouded in their narrative histories of origin and derived from claims of autochthony. The Alhassan Committee which investigated land ownership in Northern Ghana in 1978 identified first-comership as one of the bases to claim of land ownership.³ In Bawku, answers to the question of the first settlers are inconclusive and highly controversial. For one to dissect the question of the first settlers of Bawku, it is imperative to discuss the migration-and-settlement histories of the Mamprusi and the Kusasi. The Mamprusi claimed descent from Na Gbewaa, and traced their origins to Tanga, an area located east of Lake Chad, from where they settled at Pusiga near Bawku. Na Gbewaa became chief over the indigenous Gurma and some Kusasi.⁴ Upon his death, his three sons—Tohugo, Sitobu and Mantambu—migrated and founded Mamprugu, Dagbon, and Nanun respectively. Mamprusi accounts date their presence in Bawku to the seventeenth century, and link it to military assistance they offered the Kusasi during the reign of Na Atabia as Nayiri (1690-1741). Incessant incursions of Bissa into Kusasi territory compelled them to seek the military intervention of the Nayiri of the Mamprusi. It is unknown whether any historical links existed between the Kusasi and the Mamprusi before the former sought Mamprusi military assistance in the seventeenth century. However, available sources paint a faint picture of the establishment of Kusasi-Mamprusi relations prior to the seventeenth century and suggest, however inconclusively, that the Kusasi lived under Mamprusi suzerainty in Pusiga prior to the Kusasi-Mamprusi military alliance against the Bissa. In Mamprusi circles, it was this historical ruler-ruled relationship between the Mamprusi and the Kusasi that compelled Na Atabia, the Nayiri of Mamprugu at the time, to respond to the Kusasi plea.

³ *Report of Committee on the Ownership of Lands and Position of Tenants in the Northern and Upper Regions*, 1978, chaired by R. I. Alhassan, 47.

⁴ Yeremea Mahama, "A History of Bawku and the Genesis of a Senseless War" (Unpublished Manuscript, 2009), 141.

Mamprusi traditions maintain that Na Atabia responded by establishing security posts in Bawku, Sinnebaga, Binduri, Teshi, Tanga and Worikambo. These posts were administered by Mamprusi garrisoned men or warrior princes who kept safe the trade routes that passed through Kusasi and strengthened the lines of communication between Tenkudugu and Nalerigu. With time the Nayiri appointed Mamprusi princes as chiefs in these places which were predominantly Kusasi settlements.⁵ This pre-colonial arrangement secured for the Nayiri the prerogative to install a Mamprusi as Bawkunaba (the ruler of Bawku). It is unclear whether this move was part of Na Atabia's drive to expand the Mamprusi kingdom. Nonetheless, the Mamprusi chiefs did not seek to exercise political control over the Kusasi, but seemed to have restricted their leadership roles to their Mamprusi brethren in Bawku and its environs.

Traditions about the Kusasi settlement in Bawku and its neighbourhood are varied. According to R. S. Rattray (1932), however, when the Mamprusi moved from Gambaga into Bawku, the Kusasi were already in occupation of the area as tengdanas (land priests). The Kusasi were said to have migrated largely from Biengu, Zawga and Yuiga (currently located in Burkina Faso) and settled mainly in the outskirts of Bawku and engaged in crop farming and animal husbandry. Though there are other ethnic groups in the region, such as the Bissa, Moshi, Hausa and B'moba in Bawku, they constitute a politically insignificant minority who migrated into the area mainly as traders.

Pre-colonial Political Structures in Bawku and its Environs

In general, scholars, mainly anthropologists, have categorized the political structures of pre-colonial Northern Ghanaian societies either as centralized or non-centralized.⁶ The centralized political systems refer to those with central authority embodied in chiefs

⁵ PRAAD Tamale, NRG 8/2/214: JKG Syme, "The Kusasi: A Short History" (1932), 22.

⁶ Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, *Political Systems*, 5.

comparable to those in Asante. The non-centralized groups were those that lacked a locus of central political authority and instead headed by tendanas (land owners or earth priests) who could invoke spiritual and moral sanctions.

The Mamprusi were put in the category of centralized states. The general belief was that the Mamprusi immigrated into Bawku with advanced ideas of chiefship. This feature of Mamprusi society predates British and German colonial intrusion. The Mamprusi had a hierarchy of chiefs or “Na” with the Nayiri as overlord and the tengdanas operating alongside the Na. As secular rulers, the Nayiri and his sub-chiefs enforced law and order through adjudication of cases. On the other hand, Kusasi society prior to contacts with the Mamprusi and the imposition of colonial rule was said to be acephalous. The Kusasi did not acknowledge a centralized political authority headed by one individual as supreme ruler manipulating a centre of power that consisted of a court and council of elders. Their societies were headed by tengdanas who were spiritual leaders and assisted by different clan and family heads. They offered sacrifices to the land gods to secure their sources of livelihood and their authority did not go beyond imposing spiritual and moral sanctions on wrong doers. In spite of these differences in political organization, the two groups lived peacefully prior to colonial intrusion as the Mamprusi chiefs did not seek to exert political control over the Kusasi. The tengdanas operated alongside the Mamprusi chiefs, each playing different roles, and there was no evidence of Mamprusi suzerainty over the Kusasi inhabitants of Bawku and its environs.

Colonial Administration in Kusasi and Mamprugu

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the British consolidated their occupation of Bawku and Mamprugu and had established administrative stations in both areas by the first decade of the twentieth century. The arrival of the British and their hasty endorsement of the existing political arrangement as told by the

Nayiri enabled the Mamprusi to secure political suzerainty over the Kusasi. British colonial officials, looking for easy and convenient ways to administer the vast territories they had acquired by 1900, adopted a system which enabled them to govern through existing “traditional” rulers/leaders. Given the prevailing misconception that the lands occupied by the Kusasi, Busansi and Frafra were all part of the Mamprugu territory, the British colonial Administration not only endorsed the six Mamprusi chiefs appointed by the Nayiri in the Kusasi area, but also appointed new canton chiefs, some of whom were Kusasi, in areas where none had previously existed.⁷

Between 1902 and 1930 the Colonial Administration operated a direct system of administration which did not elicit the desired effect and created enormous confusion because colonial officials interfered and undermined the authority of the very chiefs they sought to empower. The circumstances necessitated a rethinking and an overhaul of the system and this culminated in the decision to introduce indirect rule in the early part of the 1930s. Before this shift, the British colonial administration launched major research into the customs, histories and traditional constitutions of the region’s peoples, including rules of succession and the relationship between different ethnic groups. The overriding idea was to amalgamate smaller acephalous groups under big centralized authorities headed by powerful chiefs who could act as rallying points for the smaller groups and ensure effective control and easy administration. This research was followed by political conferences meant to codify the data that had been collected. Of these, the Kusasi conference of March 1931 and the Mamprusi conference of December 1932 were by far the most important as they had significant consequences on Mamprusi-Kusasi relations.

For example, events prior to and during the Kusasi conference of March 1931 appear to have been manipulated or stage-managed by the colonial administration and the Nayiri to guarantee a certain

⁷ PRAAD Tamale, NRG 8/2/214: JKG Syme, “Short History.”

pre-determined outcome, i.e. the election of the Mamprusi Bawku chief as head chief of all Kusasi. As part of the colonial administration's policy to support chiefs who were "well-behaved" and promote the evolution of a strong Mamprusi state, it backed the authority of the Bawku chief for the next thirty years. Informal support for the Bawku chief had begun even earlier, at least as far back as 1910 when Nayiri Na Awibiga hinted that the chief was being groomed to become the head of all chiefs in the Kusasi District.⁸ British colonial officials backed the Nayiri's idea and from that point forward they treated the Bawku chief as superior to his colleagues even before the Kusasi conference of 1931. This enabled him to consolidate his position and influence in the Kusasi District. Eventually, many of the other chiefs came to regard him as such and took their cases to him of their own free will. A few of the chiefs such as the Kusanaba chief were coerced into recognizing him.⁹ Thus, even before the March 1931 conference, the outcome was already pre-determined. The acting district commissioner indeed warned against electing any other person than the Bawku chief.¹⁰

At the beginning of the conference, a majority of the chiefs had in fact first elected the chief of Kusenaba, Naba Ayebo (a Kusasi), to be the head by virtue of his being the longest reigning chief and also a senior Kusasi chief. He, however, declined the position, paving the way for the chief of Bawku (a Mamprusi) to be unanimously elected head or tribal chief of all the Kusasi,¹¹ much to the relief and excitement of the district commissioner who

⁸ PRAAD Accra, ADM 56/1/277, letter from Ag. DC Kusasi to CNP, 7 March 1931.

⁹ The Kusenaba did so perhaps out of jealousy and he exhibited this openly in 1933 when he showed indifference to attempts by the Nayiri to reverse Bawkunaba's elevation at the 1932 Mamprusi conference.

¹⁰ PRAAD Accra, ADM 56/1/198, Ag. DC Bawku to CNEP 30 March 1931.

¹¹ Ibid. See also T. E. Hilton, "Notes on the History of Kusasi," *Transactions of Historical Society of Ghana* (5):1962, 79-86, here 85; and Daniel A. Akologo,

presided over the conference. In conveying the outcome of the meeting to the provincial commissioner, the assistant district commissioner of Bawku J.G. Syme, showed his excitement thus:

I have the honour to give you ... satisfactory account of the chiefs' conference...I went down at the end of the meeting and asked the chiefs separately...Whether they had all been able to agree unanimously or not. They ... intimated that they would have nobody but the chief of Bawku for their tribal chief and in fact... even if the white man were to retire to Gambaga again, they could never think of making any change now.¹²

But it is curious that, in a conference dominated by Kusasi chiefs (14 out of a total of 19) a Mamprusi would be elected as tribal chief of all the Kusasi. First of all, coming originally from societies that knew no chief except tendanas, they had personally come to appreciate the material benefits and opportunities of chiefly power during the thirty years since occupation. They understood that electing a resident Mamprusi chief as Bawkunaba would please the colonial administration and the Nayiri and thus guarantee them continued enjoyment of their positions with their associated perquisites. Again, the chiefs stood to benefit from the election of a Bawku-based head chief with the power to “enskin” (officially endow with chiefly authority) them locally instead of requiring them to travel to Nalerigu for investiture at the Nayiri's palace, a tradition which involved a great deal of cost and personal sacrifice.¹³ They correctly read the mood of the colonial administration, which had been made explicit in the Acting District Commissioner's opening remarks at the conference: “Government would probably be prepared to move the whole station if they decided

“A Short History of the Kusasi of Bawku” (Undergraduate thesis, Department of History, University of Ghana, Legon, 1996), 50.

¹² PRAAD Accra, ADM 56/1/198, Ag. D C Bawku/Kusasi to CNEP, 30 March 1931.

¹³ Sub-chiefs going to the Nayiri often sent lots of presents to his palace ahead of their visit and this had to be repeated almost annually even after their confirmation.

that the chief of Bawku was not their rightful leader.”¹⁴ In a sense, one could appreciate British officials’ concerns: They had made Bawku the principal town after establishing political control over the region and having the head chief live somewhere else would have created administrative problems. Furthermore, the colonial administration and the Nayiri supported the Bawkunaba because they trusted him to promote the ultimate objective of restructuring the Mamprusi state. Though the above statement by the Acting DC did not indicate where the colonial government would have moved the station to, the implication was that it would have been relocated outside the sphere of influence of any native Kusasi chief.

The Mamprusi conference of December 1932, for its part, ratified the decisions of 1931 and led to the establishment of vague relationships between chiefs and certain ethnic groups for purposes of political expediency. The superficial arrangements resulted in unnatural superior-subordinate hierarchical relations and their attendant problems. These eventually contributed to social tensions and ultimately clashes in the 1950s. In the particular case of the Kusasi, the Bawkunaba (one of the six Mamprusi chiefs in the Kusasi area) was elected from amongst his eighteen colleagues as head chief of the entire Kusasi area at the Kusasi Conference of March 1931. The Nayiri confirmed and blessed his election that same year. As part of the new arrangements, the Nayiri would only install the Bawkunaba, who would in turn install the other five Mamprusi chiefs as well as the newly created set of twelve Kusasi canton chiefs. A new political hierarchy was thus created in 1931 and 1932.

Implications of the Changes

The social and political changes outlined above had varied and significant consequences for two reasons. First, the elective

¹⁴ PRAAD Accra, ADM 56/1/198, From Ag. DC Bawku/Kusasi to CNEP, 30 March 1931. The British had a similar problem in Navrongo and when Chianapio became president of the Kassena-Nankani confederacy they had to build him a palace in Navrongo.

principle replaced the appointive method which hitherto had been exercised solely by the Nayiri. Beginning in March 1931, headmen and *tengdanas* elected all the chiefs before they were confirmed by the investing authority (the Bawkunaba). This elective principle would be used as a basis and reference point for challenging the Nayiri's attempt to appoint Yeremea as Bawkunaba in 1957.

Furthermore, the fact that the Bawkunaba, who was equal in rank to the other seventeen chiefs, had been elevated above his colleagues to the position of head chief with the authority to install the other chiefs in Kusasi itself had various implications and ramifications. Formerly, chiefs had paid an installation fee directly to the Nayiri. With the new system, they paid the fees to the Bawkunaba. Detachment from the direct authority of the Nayiri also reduced the frequent contact between the Nayiri and his subjects, which, consequently, undermined his authority, as he no longer dealt directly with them. In line with the administrative restructuring, the Bawkunaba was also later elevated to a divisional chief under the Nayiri, which officially subordinated the Kusasi to Mamprugu for the first time. It was Kusasi resistance to this diminished status, along with determination by the Mamprusi to maintain it, which set the stage for ethnic frictions and, ultimately, conflict.

The new type of chiefs created in 1932 enjoyed a status elevated beyond their historical positions. The British system of indirect rule enabled chiefs to exercise power in areas where they formerly had not. The British even recognized chieftaincy powers over areas that previously had no such institution. For non-chiefly Kusasi in Bawku, the situation was perceived as one of British-backed Mamprusi hegemony and they sought liberation from the Mamprusi yoke. Many Kusasi resented the fact that the British had assumed that the Kusasi did not have centralized political authority

prior to colonial intrusion and had appointing Mamprusi as chiefs in Kusasi dominated areas.

Within a decade of the 1931 and 1932 conferences and the manifestation of significant social and political change in Mamprugu, the Nayiri sought to recover his political authority by directly installing all eighteen canton chiefs in Kusasi. What accounted for a change in the disposition of the Nayiri? There were two major reasons for the Nayiri to change his disposition towards the British-imposed power structure in Bawku and its environs. First, two years after the Kusasi conference of 1931, the revenue accruing to the Nayiri's treasury had decreased drastically. In 1933, the Nayiri complained that he was not receiving substantial revenue from the Kusasi chiefs as was the case before 1931.¹⁵ He contemplated withdrawing the Bawkunaba's privilege of "enskinning" sub-chiefs in Kusasi and argued that his fetish required him to personally enrobe all the sub-chiefs at his palace in Nalerigu, obviously in the hope that those presenting themselves would bring along substantial offerings or gifts besides the statutory installation fees. Furthermore, the Nayiri was losing his spiritual bond and authority over the sub-chiefs because he no longer installed them and, therefore, rarely interacted with them directly.

Changing the political order required absolute approval of the sub-chiefs, yet their position was in conflict with the Nayiri's because they were resolved to sustain the new arrangement. The chief of Sinnebaga's response vividly illustrates the sub-chiefs' position: "I was made chief by Bawkunaba and I hope my heirs would be also. The Na's fetish may be troubling him but it certainly does not affect me. My people are all well and my wives are getting more children lately."¹⁶

¹⁵ ADM 56/1/198, Extracts from report of JKG Syme, Assistant DC Bawku, 19 December 1932, 3.

¹⁶ PRAAD Accra, ADM56/1/198, "Statements made by those chiefs and sub-chiefs holding Mamprusi Nam in Kusasi concerning investment by the Nayiri, 10 January 1933."

Similarly, the Chief of Binaba had this to say about the proposed reversion to the old political structure:

I cannot speak for my children but a man cannot hoe two farms I know. That is what the Na is asking us to do. I do not see the point of paying 20 pounds to the chief of Bawku and then going to the Na for a fez where I know very well I should have to pay again. No Na would give the regalia of chiefship without payment and to give the regalia means service. If he made me chief, I should have to follow him direct...Now I have been made chief by Bawkunaba and I am healthy, have plenty of wives and many cows.¹⁷

These remarks by the chiefs reflected the general sense of relief among the canton chiefs, as they no longer had to make double payments for one installation or trek to the distant town of Nalerigu for installation. Not only do these events illustrate a growing insubordination among Kusasi canton chiefs towards the Nayiri, and they also reveal their determination to demystify the Nayiri's fetish as a requirement for chiefs holding his "Nam" (chiefship). This thus marked the beginning of the serious challenges to the Nayiri's authority which would climax in 1958.¹⁸

In June 1957, political tensions threatened to boil over into conflict. Kusasi leaders blamed the British not only for imposing Mamprusi chiefs over them, but also for compelling them to recognize the Nayiri as their paramount chief. The incorporation of the Kusasi into the Mamprugu Kingdom had deprived them of their traditional autonomy and provided the Mamprusi with a historical justification for subordinating them long after the exit of the British colonial administration in 1957. Though the Kusasi found no suitable opportunity to express their frustrations until after Ghana's independence, Kusasi feelings of political repression

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

had remained palpable since 1932.¹⁹ Kusasi sources affirm that the Mamprusi began to treat the Kusasi as subjects and with disdain only from 1932 onwards.²⁰ This treatment ranged from levying taxes or tribute payments to forced labour and marginalization.

Throughout the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, it was a common practice for subjects to contribute towards the reception of chiefs' official guests. It is unclear, however, whether in Bawku this practice was restricted to only Kusasi and other non-Mamprusi. Kusasi leaders' complaints about tribute payments presumably reflected the fact that they were in the majority and considered themselves *tengdanba*, first settlers. They charged that the Bawkunaba, in the exercise of his duty to mobilize labour for public works, had abused his authority by diverting labourers, mostly Kusasi, to work on his farm and to perform domestic duties.²¹ Prior to British rule, Kusasi had occasionally assisted the Bawkunaba on his farm.²² After 1932, this voluntary practice became compulsory. The Bawkunaba's abuse of authority became a major grievance for Kusasi who were at the receiving end of this coerced labour scheme.

During the colonial period, there were more western-educated Mamprusi than Kusasi and, therefore, the latter had little access to the limited number of white-collar jobs with the Local Councils. Furthermore, Kusasi who qualified to pursue secondary education and college training were denied sponsorship by the Mamprusi State Council, which was dominated by the Mamprusi elite, in favor of Mamprusi students.²³

¹⁹ Interview with Bawa Awumbilla, 8 Dec 2011 at Legon. Also see, Akologo, "Short History," 55.

²⁰ Akologo, "Short History," 51.

²¹ Bugri Nachinaba, "The Religious Life of The Kusasi of Bawku East" (Unpublished MA Thesis, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 2002), 57.

²² Interview with Akalifa (Mamprusi spokesperson in Bawku) 12 March 2012 at Natenga-Bawku.

²³ Interview with Bawa Awumbilla (a Kusasi/Kusanga by ethnicity) at Legon, 8 Dec 2011. The Kusasi and Frafra were part of the Mamprusi State Council.

Kusasi leaders complained of illegal taxes exacted from them by the Mamprugu district council through the Bawkunaba. Apart from the Government-approved taxes, the Kusasi were required to send a percentage of their annual harvest to the Bawkunaba. Such cases of abuse of the system and highhandedness became widespread throughout the Northern Territories.²⁴ Some Kusasi had paid some form of taxation or tribute to the Nayiri prior to 1931, but such payments had been limited to Mamprusi chiefs in the Kusasi area and to Kusasi chiefs holding the Mamprusi “Nam” (chiefship) from the Nayiri.²⁵ These payments were voluntary and were not compelled by the Nayiri or the Bawkunaba.

Party Politics and the deterioration of Kusasi-Mamprusi relations

Tensions between the Kusasi and Mamprusi became worse after the emergence of political parties in the Gold Coast, with Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party (CPP) and Northern People’s Party (NPP) as the main parties in the region. These events coincided with the formation of the Kusasi Youth Movement mainly by Kusasi educated elite and college graduates. In Bawku and its environs, the CPP had the support of the Kusasi and won massively in the Kusasi-dominated enclaves. On the other hand, the Mamprusi, led by the Nayiri, rallied behind the NPP (referred to as a “chiefs’ party”). Thus, by the dawn of independence, Kusasi-Mamprusi relations had assumed a national dimension as reflected by the polarization of the support base of the CPP and the NPP in Bawku and its environs. In addition to

²⁴ For instance, Kwara, the Chief of Navrongo, subjected his people to these abuses so much that he was warned to follow the white men when they were leaving. But the Kusasi may have borne the brunt of this practice more than any other people probably because of the feeling of being wrongly placed under the Nayiri’s overlordship.

²⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 56/1/198, Extract from Diary of JKG Syme, Asst. D.C. Bawku, 19 Dec 1932.

this, Kusasi youth agitation for traditional political autonomy and they demanded that as the Kusasi were the autochthones, a Kusasi should be enrobed as the Bawkunaba.²⁶

In 1957, while tension was growing among Kusasi educated youth, the Mamprusi Bawkunaba died, which created a vacancy for the Bawku skin. There were a number of eligible candidates but three Mamprusi princes (two CPP supporters and one NPP supporter) vied for the skin. The eligible Kusasi candidate, Abugrago Azoka, then a member of the household of the deceased Mamprusi Bawkunaba, did not vie for the skin. The Nayiri chose the NPP supporter, Yeremiah Mahama, who went through the first phase of the investment. Disagreement and confusion broke out at the Nayiri's palace when Yeremiah was chosen. The disappointed Mamprusi *nabiisi* (princes) protested against the decision.

Two Kings, One Kingdom

In the midst of the confusion and anger, Abugrago Azoka, a descendant of a Kusasi tengdana, was prevailed upon to undergo what could be described as an *ad hoc* installation ceremony organized by Kusasi tengdanas using chiefly regalia still in the possession of the Mamprusi princes. Hence, Yeremiah Mahama had been replaced even before he returned to Bawku to undergo the second phase of the investment. For their part, the unsuccessful Mamprusi *nabiisi* claimed that the process of Yerimeah's nomination was at variance with practices established since the 1931 conference. They asserted that:

It has always been the custom in olden days for the chiefs and people of the Kusasi District and the heads of all the communities in Bawku town to elect... the person they thought worthy of being their chief, and by tradition and custom, the

²⁶ PRAAD Tamale, NRG8/2/138, Telegram from Bawku to Territorial Office, Tamale, dated 9 June 1957.

candidate elected was then sent to the Nayiri for the investiture. Records in the government agent's office, Bawku will reveal that this system was carried out during the installation of the late Na Bugri and Na Yakubu...Na Wuni was ... nominated and installed by the Nayiri after consultations with the heads of all the communities in Bawku town and the 17 villages.²⁷

The parallel enskinment of the two contestants as Bawkunaba created an imbroglio. The situation led to protest and the first ethnic clash between the Mamprusi and Kusasi when Azoka was officially recognized as Bawkunaba.

Since that first clash in 1957, efforts by both the Ghanaian state and non-state actors to resolve the differences have yielded no positive results and indeed interventions by some post-colonial governments rather politicized the conflict, making it protracted. In 1958, for example, the government established a commission of inquiry headed by Opoku Afari to investigate the claims of both parties and make recommendations to government. The effort turned out to be fruitless as the commission's report, which was in favour of the Kusasi, was rejected by Mamprusi leaders. They accused the commission of having a bias in favour of Kusasi. The Mamprusi leaders continued their agitation and in fact challenged the report in court, which subsequently ruled their favour. Though the Appeals Court ruling of October 1958 overturned the earlier verdict and upheld the commission's report, Mamprusi leaders petitioned the Government of the National Liberation Council, leading to the passage of the NLCD 112 in 1966. This new decree replaced the Kusasi Bawkunaba (Abugrago Azoka) with a Mamprusi (Adam Azamgbeogo), deepening the politicization of the conflict. Kusasi leaders strategized and bided their time for a regime change to launch an appeal for a review of the Bawku skin affair.

²⁷ PRAAD Tamale, NRG8/2/138, "Petition to the government agent in Gambaga by the princes of Bawku and their supporters protesting against the installation of Yeremea as Bawkunaba, 7 June, 1957."

The opportunity came in 1983, when Kusasi leaders successfully lobbied the PNDC government to pass PNDCL 75. This decree, according to Kusasi opinion leaders, “only sought to correct an illegality committed by the passage of the NLCD 112 which unilaterally ignored the 1958 Appeals Court ruling on the matter.”²⁸ The PNDCL 75 decree posthumously re-instated Abugrago Azoka I and paved the way for the enskinment of Abugrago Azoka II as Bawkunada in 1983.

As with the 1966 decree, the 1983 PNDCL 75 decree only satisfied the desires of Kusasi leaders. The same year witnessed another violent clash of the two factions, which erupted as Mamprusi were provoked by a song composed by John Ndebugre during the “Saman pi-id” festival celebrated annually by the Kusasi.²⁹ The lyrics apparently reflected joy from the “de-skinment” of the Mamprusi Bawkunaba and the “enskinment” of Abugrago Azoka II. While the song emboldened the Kusasi youth, it aroused apprehension and anger among the Mamprusi, which resulted in new clashes that year. Calm was restored by security personnel deployed to the area. However, that was only an ad hoc measure and offered temporary peace. From then on, chieftaincy was linked to ethnic dominance. Thus in 1984 fighting erupted over arguments about the right to sell in the kola market in Bawku, and in 1985 a quarrel over a Kusasi lady by three men (a Busanga, a Mamprusi and a Kusasi) was enough to ignite new fighting.³⁰

²⁸ Interview with Jame Abagus (Kusasi Youth Leader), 13 March 2012, in Bolgatanga.

²⁹ Interview with Iddi Wuni (Mamprusi), March 2012. The lyrics of the song translated thus: “when the white man goes, the spear is still there.” He meant that, after the British Colonial Administrators left, the Africans took over and so if the Mamprusi (who were the white men) are gone, Abugrago (who has a spear as a symbol of his authority) is still there. This was said to be a mockery of the Mamprusi.

³⁰ Interview with Bugri Naclinaba, November 2011, in Accra. The three lovers were crushed in the girl’s house and fighting begun, engulfing the two main rival ethnic groups.

The last major clash occurred immediately after the 2000 general elections and involved disputed parliamentary results from the Bawku Central Constituency.

Since 1957, The Regional and National Houses of Chiefs have done little to resolve the issue, as they have indicated that the matter is beyond their scope.³¹ Some Kusasi sources, however, were of the opinion that the Regional House of Chiefs could not intervene because most of its members held their “Nam” or chiefship from the Nayiri and could not be trusted by the Kusasi to be impartial and fair arbiters.³² While the Regional House of Chiefs was held back owing to mistrust, the Ministry of Culture and Chieftaincy Affairs itself sought refuge in the constitutional provision that placed responsibility for the solution of all chieftaincy disputes on the National and Regional Houses of Chiefs. All the measures taken to resolve the protracted conflict did not yield fruitful results largely because of the politicization of a purely traditional matter and failure to address the root causes of the conflict, thus making it protracted.

Conclusion

When the British colonial administration placed an acephalous society, one that had for many years been accustomed to the revered authority of a spiritual leader, under the more authoritarian secular regime of neighboring chiefs (the Nayiri) it fomented conflict between the two communities. British officials estimated that chieftaincy was essential to the success of indirect rule. They therefore sought to create chiefs where none existed, or to expand the authority of local chiefs to include neighboring acephalous communities. This practice was the foundation for the conflict.

³¹ James Abangus (Kusasi Youth Leader) 2012.

³² Interview with John Agogre Akparibo (Kusasi), former presiding member of Bawku District Assembly, in Tamale, 30 March 2012. Also see “Minutes of Meeting with Members of Parliament and Kusasi Representatives on 1 March 2002.”

Secondly, the Kusasi conference of March 1931 undermined Kusasi tradition, custom and history. It established dominant-subordinate relations between the Mamprusi and the Kusasi, epitomized by the decisions of the Mamprusi conference of 1932, which created the conditions for conflict between the two ethnic groups. Multi-party elections in the Gold Coast in the 1950s prior to and after independence contributed to the deterioration of Kusasi-Mamprusi relations. Electoral politics divided the Kusasi and the Mamprusi into mostly pro-CPP and pro-NPP factions, respectively. This, together with the agitation of Kusasi youth for autonomy, provided the fuel and spark for the Kusasi-Mamprusi conflict.

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